

Crow's Caws: Radical Identity Crisis

NIn March 1998 I wrote an article for *OITM* called "On Serenity and Revolution" where I announced (mostly to myself) that I switched bottom lines. I would no longer let my political theories guide my behavior, but would pay closer attention to my spiritual principles as I lurch through life. I'm in the midst of another lurch, figuring out how to be spiritually ethical while supporting positions that place me in the camps of political radicals.

There was a time (about 20 years ago) when a lot of my lesbian feminist cohorts were disdainful of spirituality. Most of us equated spirituality with religion, and most of us queer folk were wounded by organized religions as we struggled to affirm our gayness.

One lesbian I interviewed in a series of sessions with Burlington activists said, "I had rejected religion because I was raised Catholic, and I was certainly in grave danger if I looked at Catholic rules since I was sleeping with women. I was forced to choose, so I rejected religion. I didn't know there was any other alternative"

Another woman said,

Us queer folk have been wounded by organized religions as we've struggled to affirm our gayness.

"Judaism was very tied up with sexism. I had to go to Hebrew School up until the age of thirteen. I remember taking a confirmation class. It was an all-girls class taught by an orthodox rabbi's wife. I hated it and cried because I was going to have to wear this pink dress and go up in front of the podium. We each had to say this speech divided up into parts describing the role of the Jewish woman. It made me sick because I didn't believe a word of it. I wasn't going to wash the children's feet, make a kosher home, make the husband's bed."

Lately, the implication of clinging to spiritual principles while trying to remain a political activist feels confusing. Take my stance on the Middle East. As a Jew attached to the survival of Israel I find myself trying to accept a more nuanced perspective towards the Israeli/Palestinian conflict than simply shouting in the streets that the Israelis are the bad guys, and the Palestinians are the good guys.

I certainly acknowledge that the Israelis need to stop the

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occupation and allow (let alone help) the Palestinians to build a viable state of their own, but not at the expense of Israeli survival. Giving up some land and sharing the resources more equitably, yes – but I often feel myself backed into a corner when the voices from the Left trash the hell out of Israel and refuse to acknowledge that going after civilian populations on either side is not the answer.

I also admit that my yearning for a non-violent solution comes from a place of privilege: I don't have to live directly under siege, nor do I have to mourn the death of my child blown up in a bus on the way to the market. Yet my rational mind tells me that all these punishments and retaliations only wreak more havoc.

If I don't put my body on the line to liberate Palestinians (such as standing in front of Israeli tanks or sitting in Palestinian houses about to be blown up) than am I not doing enough? If I take time to cultivate compassion for both sides, then am I minimizing Palestinian suffering and Israeli abuse of power?

Cultivating compassion for both sides of a conflict is one spiritual principle I'm working on. When I practiced lesbian-feminist politics years ago, haste, impatience and intolerance for those "unenlightened" unfortunates who were in my way (potential allies or so-called "enemies") polluted my process.

Here's an example from one of my interviewees of how the old Burlington Women's Community hurt each other by our aggressive earnestness to right all wrongs. "I remember 'Rebecca' really attacked me once. She said I should educate myself on Jewish issues, and she shouldn't have to explain this stuff to me. I was almost in tears, but I got up the guts and called her on the phone. ... I said, 'I don't think what you're saying is fair. ... You mean that I can't admit that I don't know or understand something? I have to know it all before I can be part of your group?'"

Humility, compassion, slowing down, avoiding self-righteous anger and power-driven argument – these were spiritual principles that were mostly lacking in our fervent women's community 20 years ago. One of us put it this way: "I think it was our lack of spiritual development that created a lot of destruction within our community. We didn't see how important compassion might be. ... We were looking to free women from oppression. ... A lot of what we

were up to was having to push against who we thought were the oppressors – so the whole style was pushing against or having to condemn this or that."

It is also important for me to keep in mind that most solutions to social conflicts are not static. One solution always leads to another problem. The path to peace is ultimately a mystery. I can take a guess, a small step; but I do better if I acknowledge that I don't have the answer. How do I know if five thousand people standing in front of tanks which could lead to a massacre is any more effective than sending a letter to the editor of my local newspaper that is noticed by one of my senators who is then inspired to create new legislation which in turn blocks a thousand war-mongers?

I have no idea what will tip the balance towards peace. Ultimately, I have to choose the methods that make the most sense to me given my life circumstances and limited perspective. The world could probably use a thousand more activists willing to put their bodies on the line, but I need to avoid contests based on who is the most politically correct.

Our task is to undertake the agonizingly slow often-painful process of changing our own behavior by asking for help and working in collaboration with others. Taking responsibility for our own actions can include moments of intense beauty and insight. It can be accompanied by tears of compassion for our misguided pasts and our essential vulnerability as we grow up and become right-sized. It can lead to intimacy with others who are struggling to behave morally and to recognize we will never get it completely right for as long as we live.

And we can still have fun. You'd be surprised how satisfying it is to laugh at yourself when you realize you're being a jerk – especially if there are others beside you who are laughing at themselves as well.

Life used to be simpler when we dykes held up signs in front of fraternities that said, "Castrate rapists." Perhaps we had to use those tactics to create the lasting institutions in this town that serve abused women such as rape crisis centers or battered women's shelters. I would love nothing more than to see a lasting peace created in the Middle East, but I can't just point my finger at "the enemy" and demand they be mutilated. The enemy is within me. My "radical credentials" are on shaky ground these days, but I find I have to take a leap of faith that cleaning up my own act to the best of my ability will set the stage for political action that will be more effective in the long run. ▼

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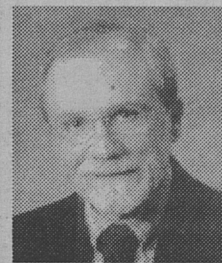
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